

# **Our domain is the shadow... strike hard and fade away without a trace.**

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

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The Adolescent Manic Obnoxious Terrapins were such a, like, totally radical, hip and happenin' force to be reckoned with back in the late '80s and early '90s that their lasting legacy is a ubiquitous, encyclopaedic knowledge of their origin story and the reptile quartet's vital statistics.

Quickly emerging as the ultimate urban surfer dude jujitsuvians, they first entered our consciousness in 1984 via their inaugural comic book release. Yet it wasn't until 1987 - when they were bestowed with their own animated cartoon - that the bodacious bohemians really hit the headlines, and Toys R Us. Cowabungas were literally flying off the shelves! Literally! With wings and everyfink! They need little by way of introduction - you could even write an in-depth article on

the subject without first refreshing your memory by consulting Wikipedia. :|



It goes without saying that the spaghetti-loving heroes in a half shell were named after famous Italian singers; Pavarotti, Vionnetta, Amaretto, Farrero Raffaello and Cornetto (the extra one was an understudy who sadly never got a gig thanks largely to the first team's super-healthy diet). Being eternally teenaged, they're just old enough to be aspirational for the little ones, yet not *too* old so as to be uncool like our nagging parents and teachers.

"Yes, Dudes and Dudettes, major-league butt-kicking is back in town."



Naturally, kids around the globe not only wanted to watch them, but *be* them, so in 1989 the totally tubular Terrapins made their debut appearance in the arcades. TMNT (that can't be right?) left the coin-op world shell-shocked courtesy of its simultaneous four-player melee style scrolling beat 'em up approach to cartoon franchise gaming. It features all the core villains from the TV show, sampled speech, an abridged version of the genuine theme tune, special moves and combos and even a jet-powered skateboard level that would give Marty McFly a run for his money!



Its enduring appeal amongst gamers was so extensive that Konami went on to rehash the formula for their Simpsons arcade game in 1991. Employing the same engine and mechanics as TMNT while replacing the Terrapins with Bart, Lisa, Marge, and Homer, and their jujitsu weaponry with a skateboard, skipping rope, hoover and flailing limbs, this too was a runaway success in amusement arcades around the world. A year later the X-Men would 'me-too' their way into the same territory with Konami's assistance.



1991 was a confusing year for kids. Bart was telling us not to "have a cow, man" while Probe were bunging them down our throats via all the popular home gaming platforms of the era. For Probe were the team responsible for porting the original reptile-infused edition of the Konami beat 'em up schtick to the ZX Spectrum, Amiga, Amstrad CPC, Atari ST, PC and Commodore 64.



With plenty of gnarly muscle behind the project it was a guaranteed success from the outset. Sanitised and published by Robert Maxwell's gaming spin-off division, Image Works, TMNT mutated into 'Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles: The Coin-Op' to match the UK revision of the cartoon on which it's based. Ah, I think I may have made some minor errors earlier, sorry. Having 'coin-op' in the title also helped to distinguish the arcade port from the Turtles platform games released previously for multiple home computers and consoles. 'Heroes' were substituted for 'Ninjas' since the merest mention of the 'n' word in the UK would cause little kiddiewinkles' heads to implode. Fact. There was an episode of Mythbusters on the topic I'm sure.

Coder, Martin J. Bysh, and graphics artist, Hugh Riley, had high hopes for the conversion according to the promotional Amiga magazine preview articles, and Probe spokesman/producer, Joe Bonar. Yet (unconfirmed) internet rumours suggest that due to Image Works' parent company,

Mirrorsoft, going bankrupt prior to its proposed November 1991 release (scheduled to coincide with the second movie's theatrical unveiling), the unfinished game was later distributed in its 'work in progress' state, presumably to help pay off their concerned creditors. What ended up on the games shop shelves is believed to be the pre-release copy issued to the critics for review purposes. Woah, hellacious, man!

Particularly because former Mirrorsoft employee, Richard Hewison, contradicts the story in his 'Reflections of Mirrorsoft' article published in Retro Gamer issue 9 (October 2004).

"Mirrorsoft was working on a number of key titles when Robert Maxwell disappeared off his boat on 5th November 1991. Immediately after he disappeared (but before it was confirmed that he was dead) everything at Mirrorsoft continued as normal. Image Works had just published First Samurai, Mega-Lo-Mania and Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles - The Coin-op, and it was looking forward to a successful period of sales over Christmas."

This doesn't discount the possibility that the game was rushed to market (licensed titles with fixed release deadlines typically are). What we *can* say with more certainty is that the cause wasn't the demise of Robert Maxwell and the subsequent implications for the fate of his game publishing business.

Either explanation for the hasty release would suffice to account for the game's disappointing audio presentation. Jeroen Tel's arcade-faithful music is only briefly heard whilst the *title screen* is displayed; pressing 'm' in-game as instructed in the manual does absolutely nothing. Similarly, the sampled speech alluded to in interviews is entirely absent, whilst the sound effects reverberate as though the action is taking place inside an echo chamber.

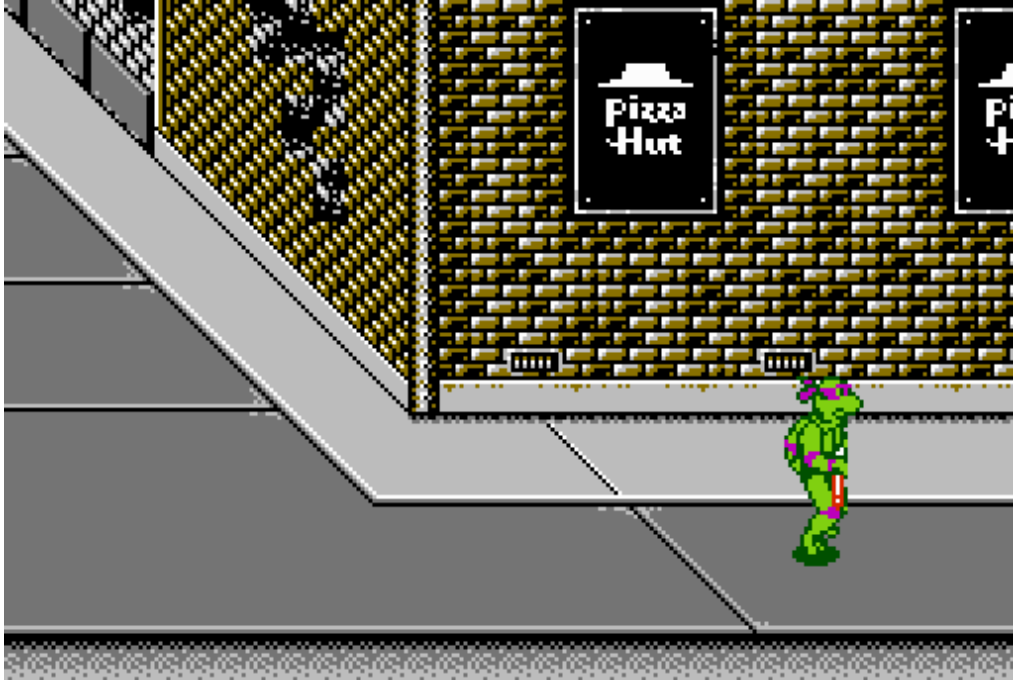
In fact the game was never intended to be devoid of music, and talk of including some of the coin-op version's speech snippets wasn't just hyperbole. Unassigned audio is actually present on the single disk and can be extracted via a mod ripper, suggesting plans for it to accompany the in-game action. To establish exactly what went wrong I quizzed Jeroen Tel, who confirmed that hardware limitations and a lack of time to implement the additional audio sadly meant that it fell by the wayside, kept locked away from the average consumer.

"At the time I was working at Probe Software Ltd in London (age 18) and indeed, the whole game was kind of rushed and indeed, the music in the game couldn't take ANY ram, basically, so I had to re-sample the samples to such a low level it was almost scary!

I don't know the exact reason for rushing the job, because I was working on a zillion titles at the time. I think the best person to ask (or people to ask) would be the game producer(s) Neil Young or Joe Bonar."

Incidentally, something similar transpired with regards to the music intended to serenade Spectrum and Amstrad gamers as they pummel assailants into the tarmac.

Sound effects too are a shadow of what they might have been. 70+ per level were to be included originally, most created using a Yamaha SY77, with others sampled directly from the arcade cabinet and translated to the Amiga via Noisetracker. Play the 'finished' product and you'll know you can count the number of unique sound effects with fingers to spare, and most of them are variations of "doof, doof". A minuscule 60k of memory capacity was allocated to the game's entire audio repertoire so by today's standards it's amazing any was included at all.



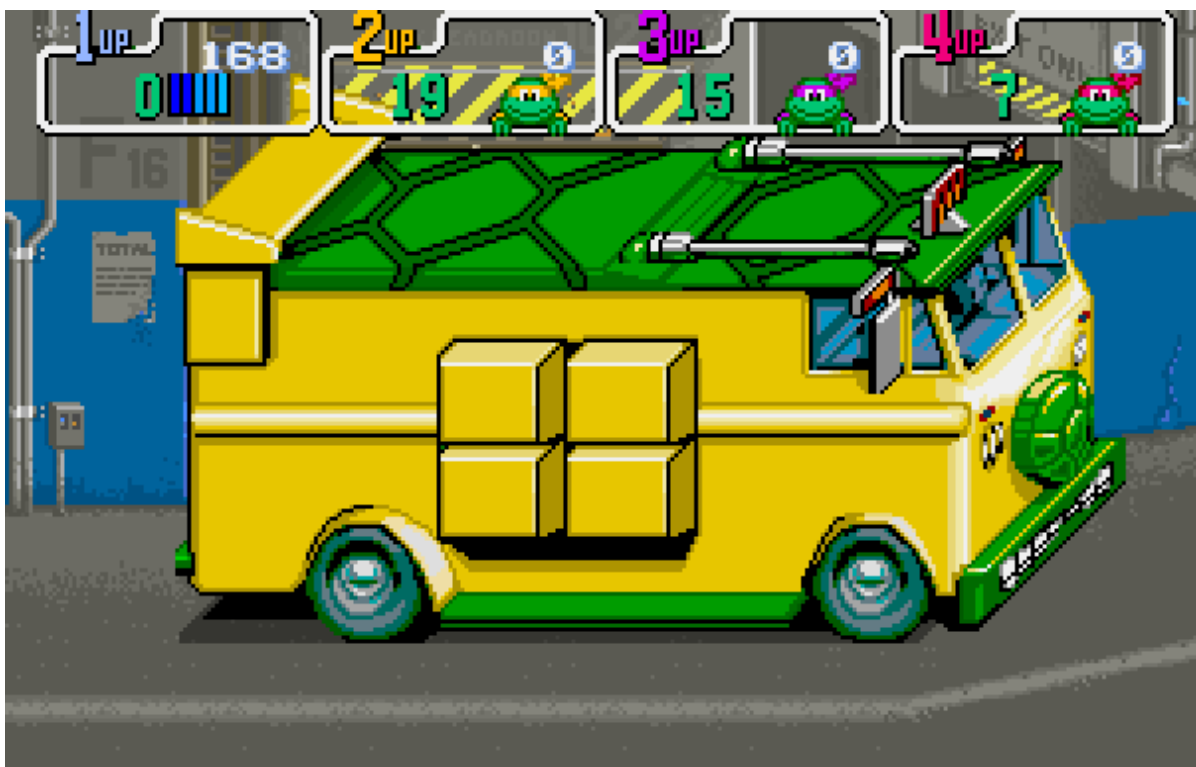
"As with any turtle, if you pick up a pizza your energy is immediately replenished (an extra life is given on CBM 64), and these pizzas must be real tasty, because just one will put any of the boys right back up there on full power."

Ah, *pizza*, that's it, not spaghetti!

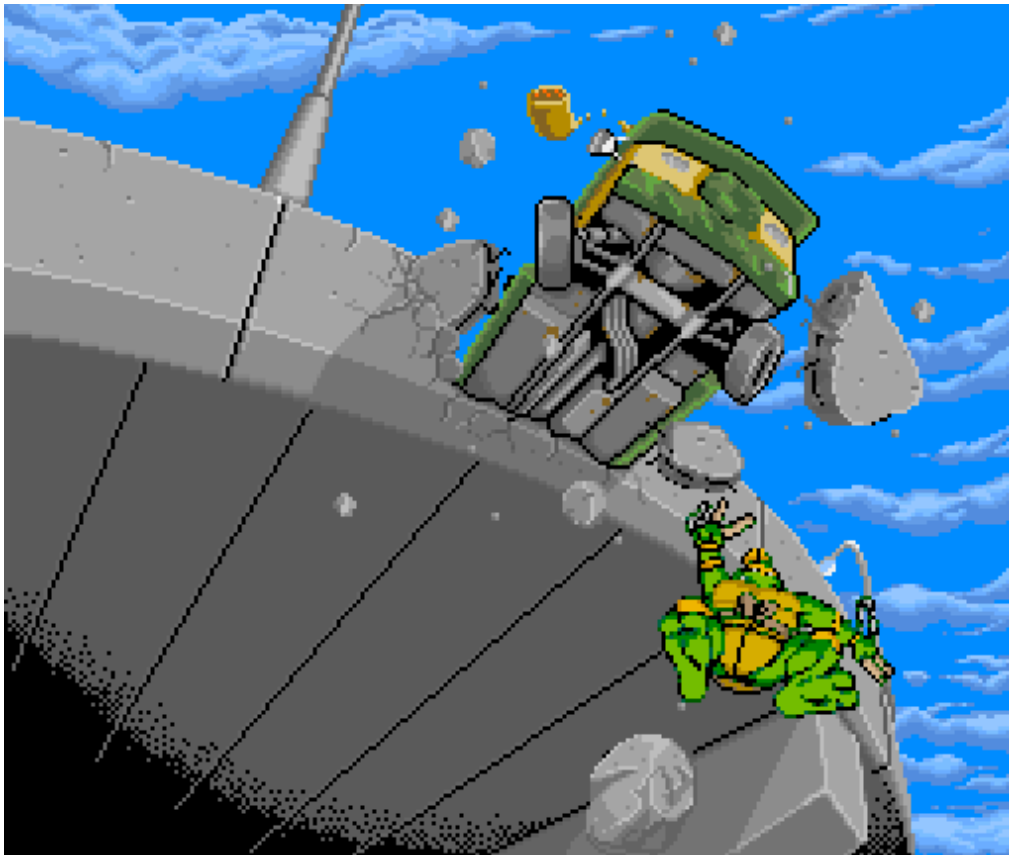
Contributing to the difficulty of producing an accurate replica of the arcade PCB was no doubt a lack of access to the raw source material, or 'assets' if you prefer. By the time these were delivered by Konami, Martin and Hugh had managed to recreate most of the game from the ground up by playing the arcade cabinet, and using their own judgement with regards to how it should be translated for the home market. They likely didn't factor in that guesswork wouldn't wash with die-hard Turtles aficionados who had already re-mortgaged their parents' house to pay for their arcade game-time. They'd studied the cartoon, dissected the comic books, and took their afternoon meal to school in the officially licensed neon green lunchbox.

Nonetheless, with little support from Japan and working to a tight time-frame, Martin, Hugh and Jeroen managed to capture the essence of the franchise admirably. Most of the fundamental components were successfully reproduced for the Amiga port, inevitably of course in a downgraded form due to hardware limitations. We have to keep in mind that the arcade PCB is customised hardware, not a standard, off the peg, jack of all trades system like the Amiga was expected to be. How many of us could afford to upgrade them beyond the obvious trapdoor memory enhancement? My half megabyte of extra RAM cost £30 at the time. Enough said.

One major exception concerns the powered skateboarding level - the only deviation from the traditional 'on foot' fighting - in that it's entirely absent in the Amiga iteration. This concludes with your chosen turtles riding alongside and leaping into the party wagon...



...right before it careens through the elevated highway's safety barrier. Plummeling to the ground with only solid concrete to break its fall, the Turtlemobile is a complete write-off.



It might have made more sense to grab the wheel of the *driverless, suicidal* vehicle, steer it around the bend keeping it upright, and then ask all those nagging questions later. Not quite so dramatic and spectacular, granted.

Amiga gamers, of course, would be none the wiser since the level was clipped from the story-line altogether for the 16-bit re-imagining. In the following stage we only see the *repercussions* of the theatrical stunt - the crumpled, dysfunctional vehicle wedged against the edge of the screen - with no explanation as to how the situation arose.



In accordance with the arcade game, its Amiga equivalent scrolls both horizontally and vertically on alternate occasions, and the story - what little there is of it - remains identical. In a nut... I mean *turtle* shell, Shredder's foot clan

have kidnapped everyone's favourite yellow-jump-suited top TV news reporter, April O'Neil, and the turtles' mutated rat mentor, Splinter, and both need to be rescued. It's based on the cartoon show that ran for ten series between 1987 and 1996. Not on any particular episode, just in general. Although there can't have been that many episodes that *didn't* involve some variation of this motivator.

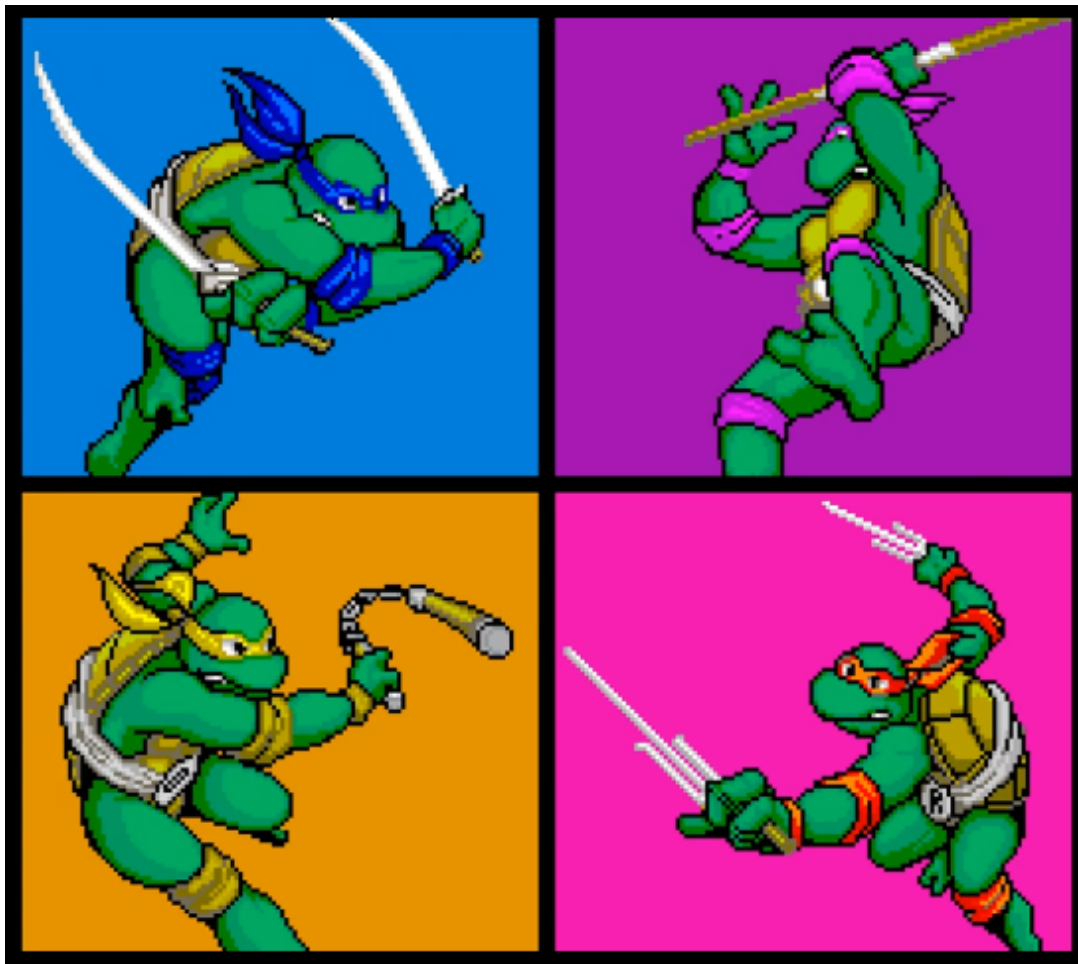
April O'Neil is not only the best T.V. news reporter in town but also she's the only news reporter in New York that has been kidnapped by the evil Foot Clan and lived to tell the tale (you *did* save her in Turtles didn't you?). Not only that, but to prove just how individual she is, she's been kidnapped by the foul Foot Clan yet again and only the hard-backed, half-shell heroes can save her. Or can they? The Foot Clan are not a highly organised cartel of Chinese chiropodists, but in fact are expertly trained ninjitsu ne'er-do-wells bound to the service of the evil Shredder.

**- taken from the game's manual**



Despite having all four turtles to choose from, the Amiga version only allows simultaneous two-player action, as opposed to the arcade's unrestricted four-player mode. Each are equipped with their correct signature weaponry and are further differentiated by agility, reach and coloured ninja garb i.e. elbow and knee pads and eye masks. Only the coordination goes a wee bit awry for Amiga gamers since the correct colours were only implemented for Dolmio, er... I mean *Donatello* (the blue one with the katana swords). For the rest, their knee and elbow paraphernalia is uniformly blue while their eye masks actually glitch-cycle through a couple of muddy brown/orange colours as the frames of animation are alternately presented.





Some baddies suffer from the same chromatic fate. Rocksteady, for instance, is turquoise in his later incarnation, while displaying a blue tattoo on his arm in his earlier appearance.



Minor details to anyone who *isn't* a turtles fan, sacrilege otherwise. A shame since these issues would likely have been identified during playtesting and be easily fixed prior to release. Quite feasibly this essential playtesting may never have occurred.

With a two-button joystick configuration (x4), the arcade version dedicates one to jump and a separate button to attack. No such luxury is afforded on the Amiga; the same button doubles for both functions, pushing up as well as fire serving as the means to jump. As you can imagine this makes flying kicks more awkward than we'd like.

Pushing both fire buttons simultaneously triggers the turtles' special moves for coin-op gamers, while these are not an option at all for Amigans. Further nuances such as springing off walls and slamming adversaries into background furniture to make attack patterns more imaginative were also nixed.

## **Spin that stick!**

Pressing fire or fire with either left or right will make your turtle do one of three attacking moves - kick, jab, thrust.

Pressing fire with up will make the turtle do a jump and a spin directly up in the air.

Pressing fire with down will make the turtle do an upward jump and swipe simultaneously.

Pressing fire with up/right or up/left will make the turtle do a flying jump kick.

Just pressing up/down/left/right will move the turtle around the screen.

**- taken from the game manual**

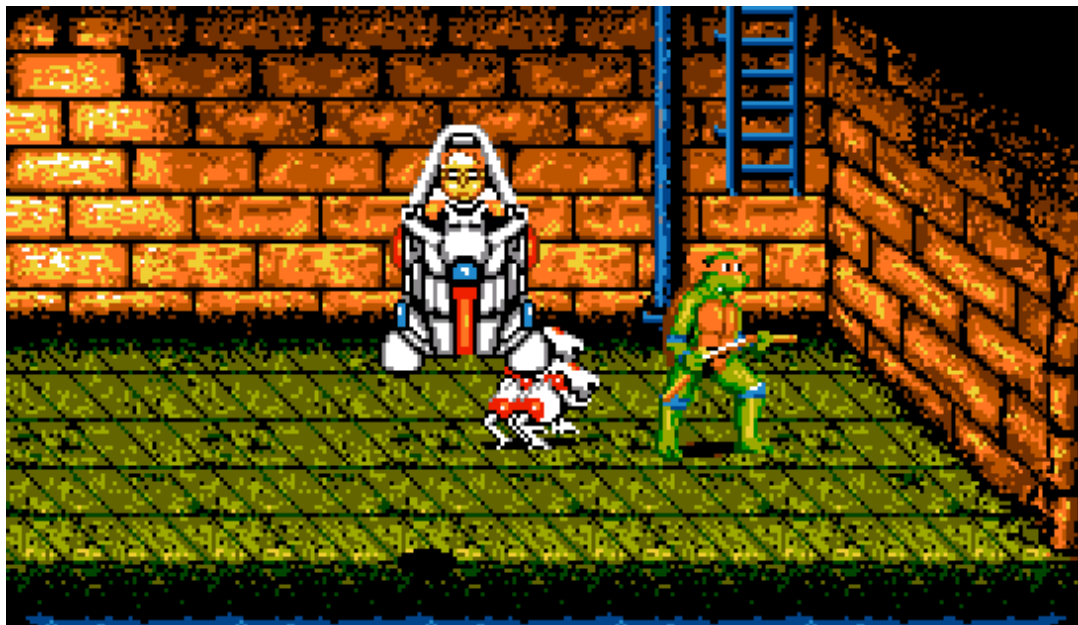
In the arcade version baddies are colour-coded to indicate their formulaic attack patterns and favoured weaponry, allowing players to pre-empt their tactics and respond accordingly. Its Amiga counterpart instead takes a more haphazard approach, which is to no detriment really. In fact, it makes more sense to keep players guessing.

Surprisingly all the major players from the arcade's Bad Guy Department are present and correct and rolled out in the right order... Rocksteady (depicted above) and BeBop...





Baxter Stockman...





Granitor...



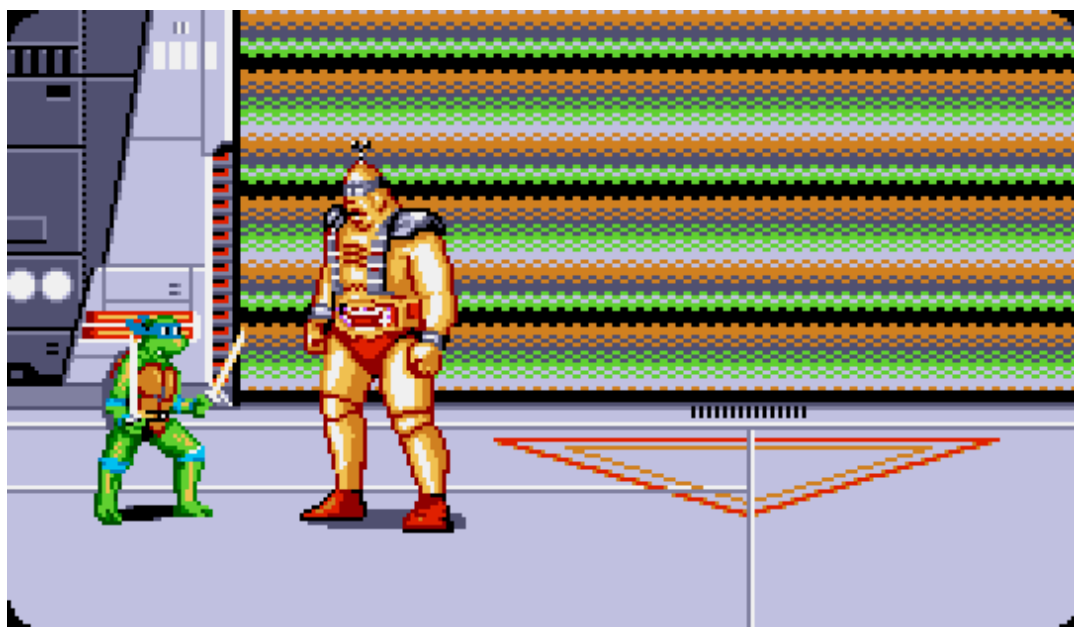


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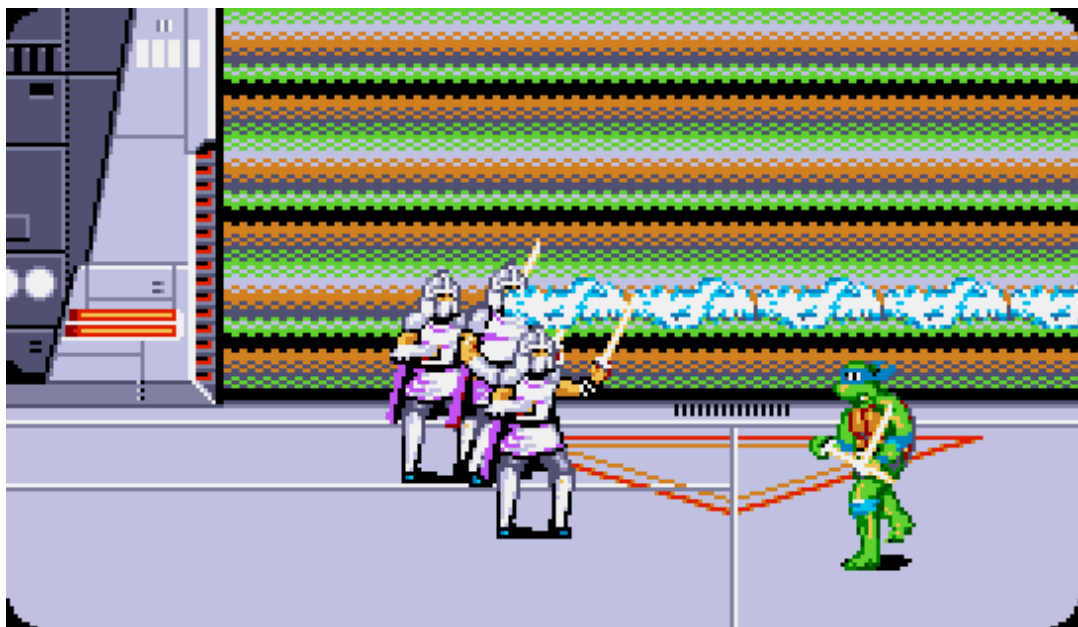


....and Krang...





...and of course, Shredder himself, camouflaged amongst various clones that can only be exposed by dislodging their helmets. Wicked! *Good* wicked or *bad* wicked, I'm not sure. :|





Unfortunately, some let the side down by managing to connect with the turtles while on the wrong plane of existence, which appears to be a collision detection issue rather than a design choice. Neither the coin-op or port is consistent when it comes to indicating when we've scored a hit, or how close the key antagonists are to giving up the ghost. Sometimes they flash, sometimes not, and no enemy health bars are evident as can be seen in the later Turtles games. Making the challenge even trickier, the player's energy level isn't replenished upon commencement of the next stage.

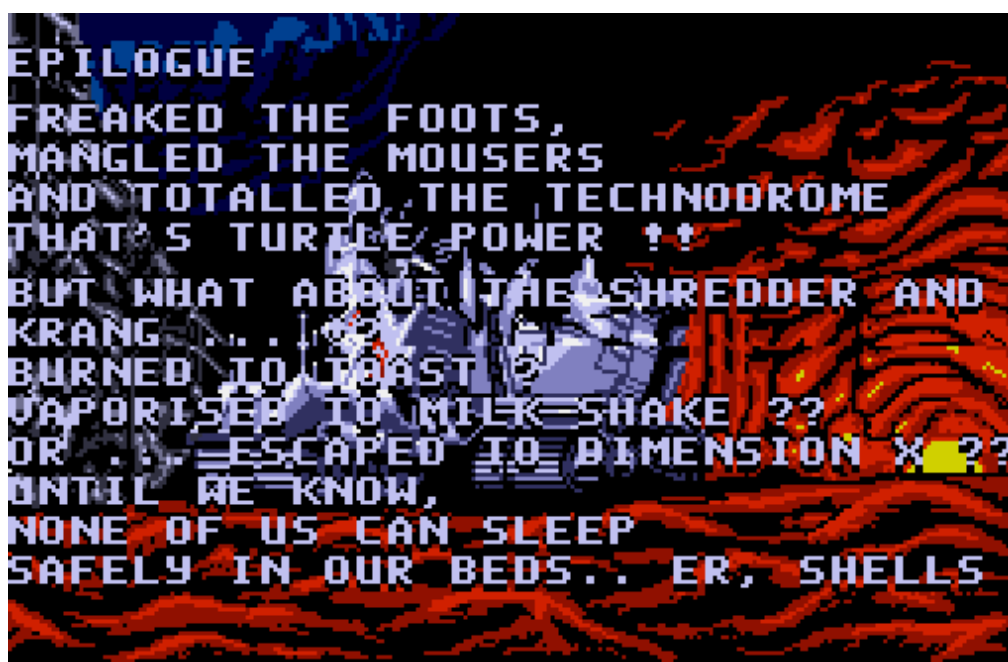
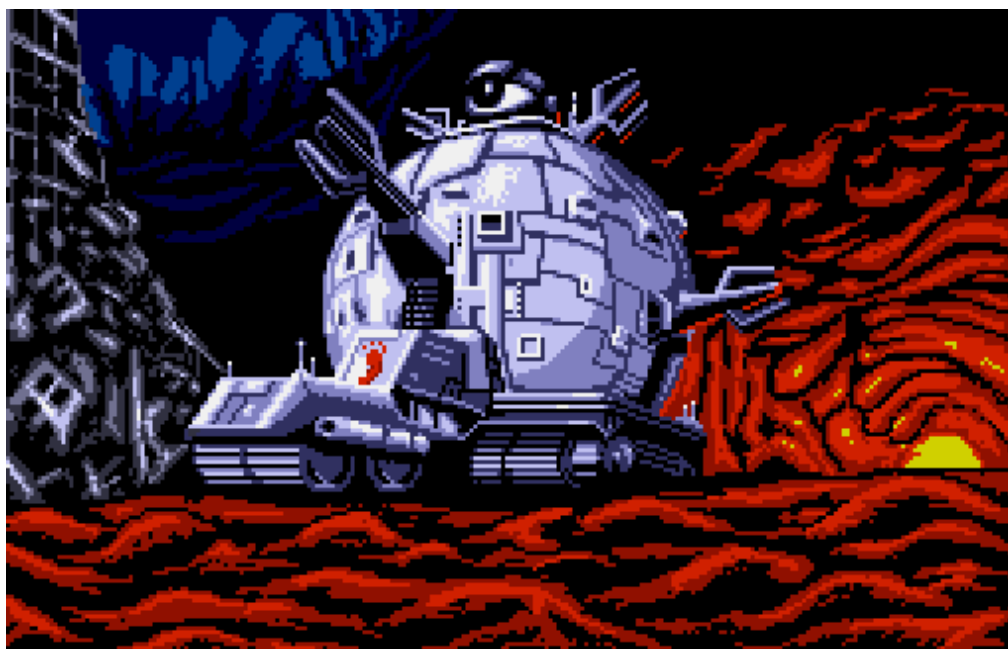


## How to be a hero

The dateline is now, the place is New York and the player must choose their favourite Turtle with which to rescue the kidnapped April from a burning building infested with a carbuncle of foul Foot.

Not only that but you've got to go on to find and defeat the shifty sidekicks BeBop and Rocksteady before going onto to take out Krang and finally confront Shredder at the Technodrome.

**- taken from the game's manual**

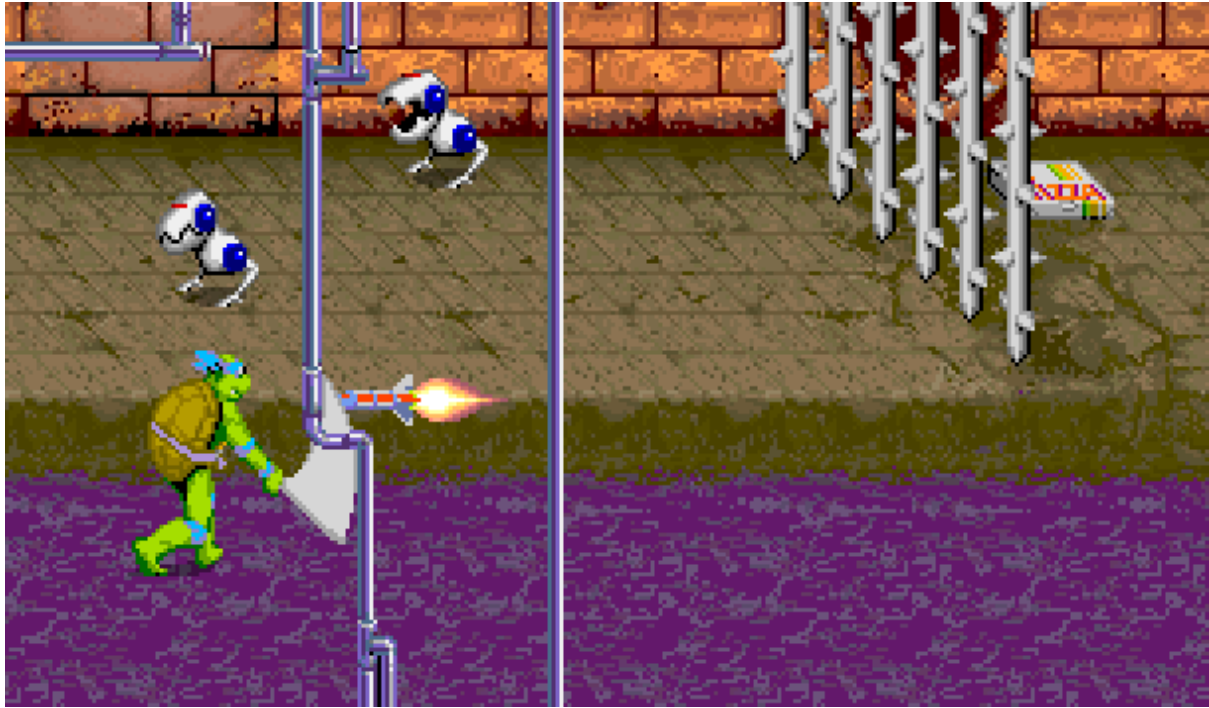


Notwithstanding any deficiencies, it's impressive how many of the arcade game's memorable intricacies - those that made it such a massive hit and a perennial favourite to this day - *were* successfully transposed...

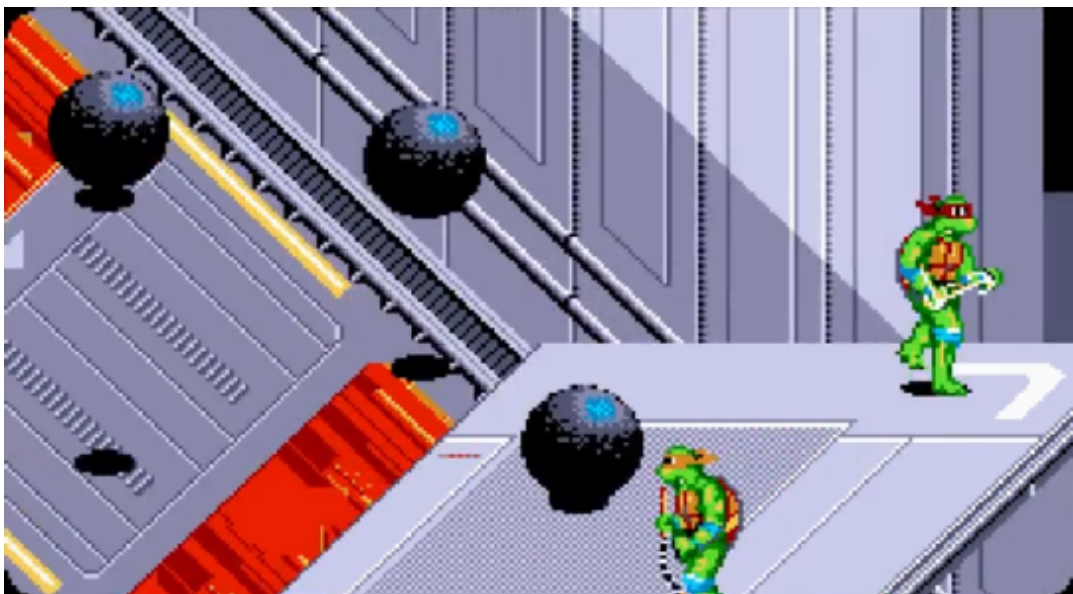
Giant cannonballs that roll down the stairs and into your path in level 1 are as much of a threat in the Amiga iteration.

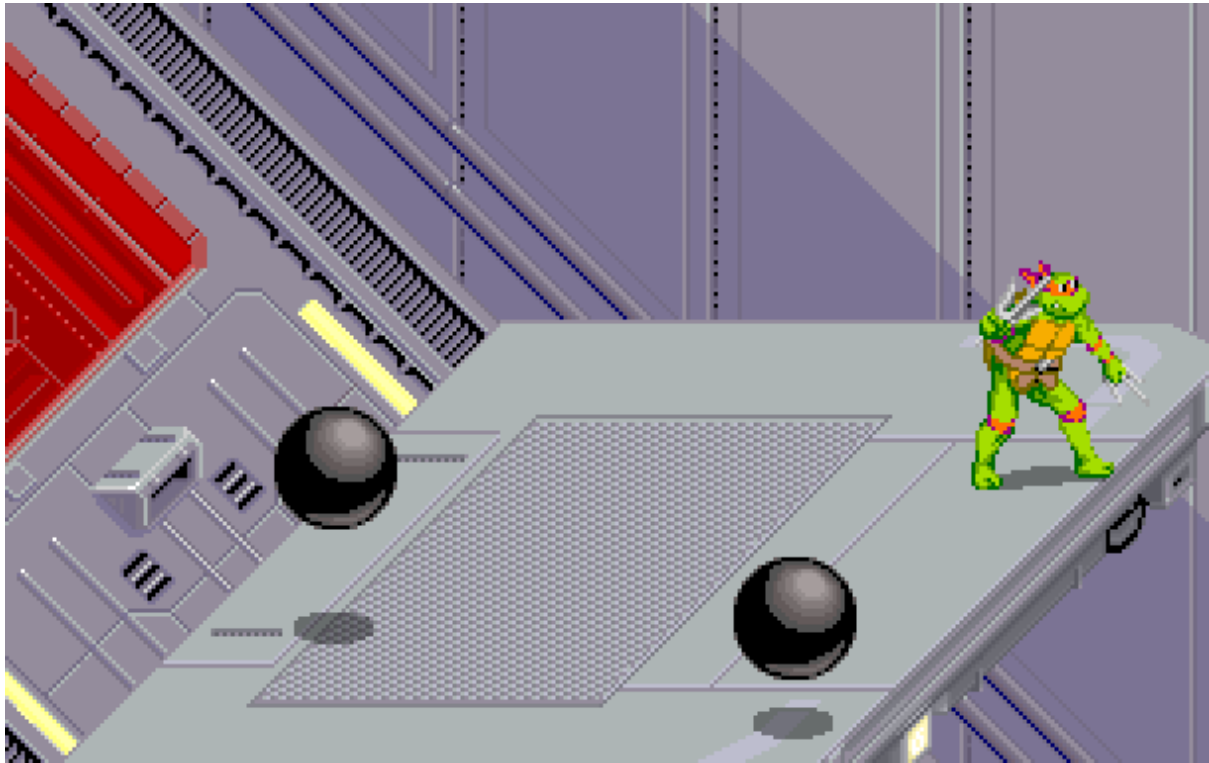


Walking directly on the surface of the sewer gunk without drowning, or even sinking slightly, is possible, despite it being deep enough to harbour heat-seeking missiles. Maybe Jesus gives lessons?



Many people won't have progressed far enough to notice that the descending lift/podium level has been replicated, albeit in an abridged form. That is the one in which you stand on a plummeting platform as it slides down the screen from left to right at a 45 degree inline while giant cannonballs hurtle into your path. What is this, the land of the giants equivalent of the Bowlarama?





Animated fire as seen in the foreground of level 1 made the cut, and it's *still* completely harmless, even if you stand right in the midst of the raging inferno.



Water hydrants can be activated, drenching baddies into submission with a torrent of water.

Foot soldiers throw manhole covers like frisbees. Boomerangs too.

April pleads for help and Shredder makes his threats via broadcasts shown on a TV in the window of a high street electronics shop.





Skateboard girl gets a cameo appearance and can be scared out of her wits by accidentally on purpose taking pot-shots at her.





Two concealed foot soldiers jump out from behind a displaced roadside billboard that's actually flush with the wall, just as illogically as ever. Did they attend the same drama school as Flat Stanley?





It's possible to fall down open manholes in the street and ask, "who turned out the lights?" Although only in text form. No sampled speech is evident.

You transform into a cartoony x-rayed skeleton whenever electrocuted.



Road signs and parking metres can be whacked loose, turning them into projectiles.



Even the bizarre human to office furniture size ratio was ported over 'accurately'. In Turtleland - let's call it *New York* -

desks are slightly *taller* than April.

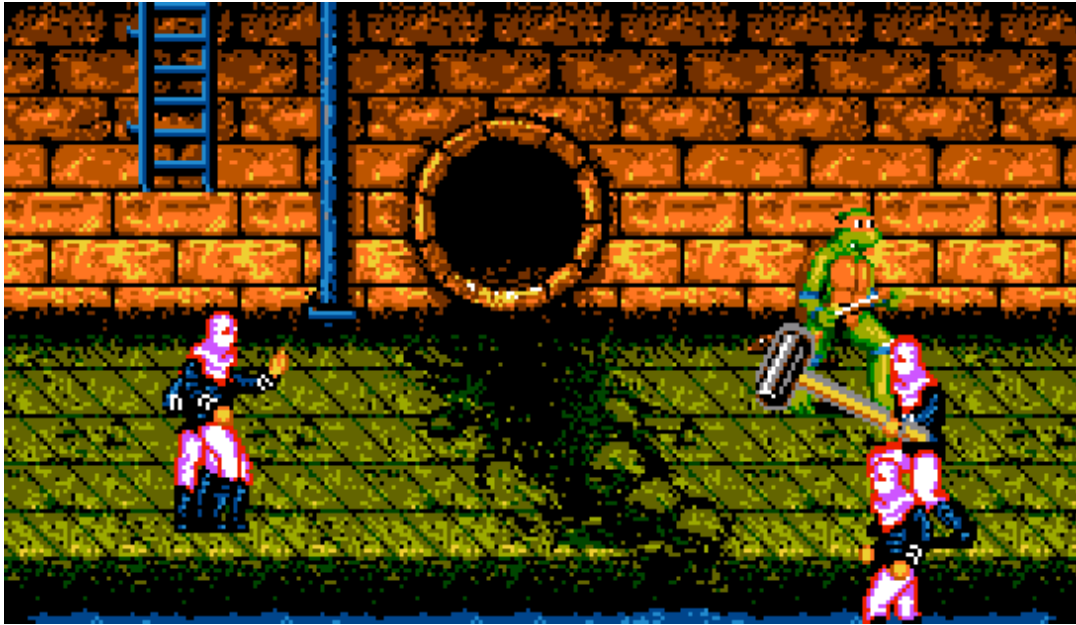


Coding on a PC and porting to the Amiga via SNASM, Martin approached the task of populating the levels with enemies using a custom map editor. A medley of miscreants - the arcade's usual line-up including Mousers and Roadkill Rodney - were inserted before determining which if any needed to be removed to maintain the scroll rate. Though actually it doesn't appear that *any* were; the playfields are extremely busy at times.



For the same reason, the arcade's 70 frames of animation per sprite was reduced to approximately 30. Due to the cull, the Turtles no longer devolve into hatchlings upon kicking the bucket. Otherwise, the between-frame losses are less noticeable during frantic gameplay.

Background scenery was to feature animated details such as flowing sewer ooze to make the environments feel more realistic, however, these failed to materialise. Likely they were dropped to reduce processor load. To be fair though, the static Amiga backdrops aren't much more kinetic in the arcade original so we aren't missing much. In one scenario April twitches her leg a bit while watching her reptile saviours brawl over her right to freedom.



Regrettably, none of these resource-conserving measures successfully managed to eliminate the Amiga port's screen flickering or jerky scrolling issues, particularly conspicuous during two-player mode.

All things considered, TMHT for the Amiga is a decent attempt at recreating the magic of the arcade classic, especially given that we only have the unpolished, pre-release copy for comparison. Just imagine what might have been with the benefit of a reasonable development schedule and more forthcoming support from Konami. Having been squidged through the turtle soup arcade port mincing machine, is it really any wonder the heroes in a half-shell wound up being a half measure?